

Chapter 2

How Much Influence Do Interest Groups Have in the EU? Some Methodological Considerations

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Introduction

More than half a century ago, James March (1955: 432) stressed the importance of measuring interest group influence when stating: “Influence is to the study of decision-making what force is to the study of motion—a generic explanation for the basic observable phenomena.” Little can be added to this affirmation; an analysis of interest group influence remains of crucial importance to an understanding of political processes. Influence is a major objective of interest groups (if not the only one, see Lowery 2007); the increasing number of groups active in lobbying decision-makers throughout the developed world hence makes understanding interest group influence important for the purpose of both, explaining and normatively evaluating policy-making. The normative implications are particularly important at a

time when governments and international organizations aim to increase political participation by societal groups: does this participatory engineering lead to increased influence by specific domestic groups?

Alas, little can also be added to March's emphasis on the difficulties of measuring influence: "[T]here is lacking not only an immediately obvious unit of measurement, but even a generally feasible means of providing simple rankings" (1955: 434). These difficulties have meant that only few studies have attempted to measure interest group influence. Two recent surveys of the literature on interest groups in the United States hence consider the question of influence as being "exceedingly difficult to answer" (Loomis and Cigler 1995: 25) and an area of "confusion" in the literature (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 13). For the European Union (EU), a recent review even comes to the conclusion that "there seems to be hardly any research dealing specifically with the policy consequences of interest representation" in that entity (Lowery et al. 2006).

In this research note, I start from this dual insight that measuring interest group influence is both difficult and important. Nevertheless, I also submit that the difficulty of measuring influence should not be exaggerated. Analysing the impact of interest groups on political outcomes is not substantially different from other attempts at establishing causality. When discussing the relatively small number of studies that has tried to measure the influence of interest groups in the EU, I distinguish three basic methods: process-tracing, assessing "attributed influence" (March 1955), and gauging the degree of preference attainment. The aim of this exercise is to provide a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of different measures used in the literature, to outline ways of improving this literature, and to stimulate further research in this area.

The challenge

Influence is generally understood as an actor's ability to shape a decision in line with her preferences, or, in other words, "a causal relation between the preferences of an actor regarding an outcome and the outcome itself" (Nagel 1975: 29). The measurement of influence is complicated because of at least three distinct problems: the existence of different channels of influence, the occurrence of counteractive lobbying, and the fact that influence can be wielded at different stages of the policy process. First, measuring influence is difficult because it can be exercised through different channels (Dür 2009). Interest groups can shape policy outcomes through direct lobbying of policy-makers (Hansen 1991). They can also engage in outside lobbying (Kollman 1998), aimed at influencing public opinion by way of campaigns and similar activities. Furthermore, they can influence the selection of decision-makers (Fordham and McKeown 2003), for example by getting involved in election campaigns, or by trying to have some bearing on which Directorate General in the European Commission takes the lead on a specific issue. Finally, interest groups may wield structural power, that is, influence decision-makers simply because of the impact on public policy that business decisions on whether to invest in a specific area can have (Lindblom 1977; Bernhagen and Bräuninger 2005). Methods for the measurement of influence mostly neglect the possibility that influence may be exercised through so many different channels. Particularly problematic in that regard are the selection and structural power channels of influence.

Second, the occurrence of counteractive lobbying (Austen-Smith and Wright 1994) makes the measurement of influence tricky. Even if an interest group does not manage to move an outcome into a preferred direction, this does not necessarily mean that the group lacked influence. It may simply be that it had to counter the lobbying effort of another group (other groups) and was

influential in the sense that it avoided an even worse outcome. Related to this is the impact of public opinion on policy outcomes, which has to be controlled for. If a group's position is backed by public opinion, its influence on policy outcomes may be overestimated (Burstein 1998).

Third, influence can be wielded at different stages of the policy process: in the agenda setting phase, when final decisions are taken, or when decisions are implemented. In the "faces of power" debate in the 1960s and 1970s, influence at the agenda-setting stage was called "the second face of power" (Bachrach and Baratz 1962), distinct from the first, namely influence at the stage when decisions are taken. Again, it is difficult for any one project to measure influence at all stages of the policy process. Imagine a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy: the European Commission may propose a reform of this policy that reduces payments to farmers, making them strongly oppose this reform. The researcher observes that the reform is implemented practically unchanged despite this lobbying effort. Should she interpret this as meaning that farmers' groups were ineffective? Not necessarily: influence may have been wielded at the agenda setting stage. It could be that the Commission considered the reaction by the agricultural lobby before drawing up its proposal, and hence designed a proposal that it thought would just about pass. If so, the agricultural lobby was indeed influential, as it determined the limits to the extent of the reform. Although it was unable to block the reform, it was successful in avoiding an even more far-reaching change in policy (and indeed, reforms in the agricultural sector have hardly ever been very far-reaching).

Three methods for measuring influence

Measuring interest group influence, hence, is a difficult task. I will now show how the difficulties outlined affect different methods of measuring influence.

Process-tracing

Process-tracing is the most frequently used approach to measuring interest group influence in the EU (see, for example, Cowles 1995; Warleigh 2000; the contributions in Pedler 2002; Dür and De Bièvre 2007; Michalowitz 2007). As defined by two advocates of process-tracing, this “method attempts to identify the intervening causal process—the causal chain and causal mechanism—between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable” (George and Bennett 2005: 206). In other words, scholars using process-tracing try to uncover the steps by which causes affect outcomes. With respect to measuring interest group influence, scholars scrutinise groups’ preferences, influence attempts, groups’ access to decision-makers, decision-makers’ responses to the influence attempts, the degree to which preferences are reflected in outcomes, and groups’ statements of (dis-)satisfaction with the outcome.

Maria Green Cowles’ (1995) study of the impact on the passage of the Single European Act of the European Round Table of Industrialists is a prominent example of how this method can be applied to determine the influence of a specific interest group. Cowles relied on the Round Table’s access to key decision-makers, the reflection of ideas launched by the group in decisions taken, and the temporal coincidence between the activities of the Round Table and the re-launch of the process of European integration in the mid-1980s to back her case for the causal role of this grouping.

If carried out well, studies using process-tracing have several strengths. First, in small-N studies it is likely that researchers will have a reasonably good knowledge of nearly all factors influencing a political decision. This allows them to take into consideration several rival explanations of an outcome, among them the lobbying efforts of different types of actors. They may then be able to determine whether or not the influence exercised by specific interest groups contributed to the outcome. Second, many studies using process-tracing rely on semi-structured interviews. Such interviews can give researchers insights into developments that could not be gained from document analysis and/or surveys. The researcher can also probe the interviewee with challenging questions. Again, this should help researchers achieve a valid estimate of interest group influence.

Process-tracing, however, also faces a series of problems, which often cannot be overcome even in well-designed studies. Five such problems stand out: getting empirical evidence that is precise enough to cover all steps of a causal process, an over-reliance on interviews, the lack of a yardstick to assess what “influential” means, the lack of a clear correlation between the level of interest group activity and influence, and the difficulty of generalising from small-N studies. First, even when using all sources that are available for a specific case – such as documents, press reports, and interviews – it tends to be difficult to fill all the gaps in a causal chain from interest group activities to political outcomes (Loomis 1983: 186). This can lead to an underestimation of the influence if the method is applied too strictly. A researcher may conclude that no influence was exerted because she finds no evidence for one of the links in the causal chain, when actually she is encountering a problem of lack of sources; that is, the absence of proof may be taken as proof of absence. For example, lobbying may have taken place behind closed doors even if no public record remains; the absence of observed lobbying activity

leaves a gap in the causal chain that may lead researchers using process-tracing to deduce a lack of influence.

Second, because of the difficulty of gathering all empirical evidence needed, researchers using this method often heavily rely on claims made in interviews with decision-makers and lobbyists. These claims are not reliable, as interviewees may consciously or unconsciously misrepresent a situation. Interviewees may have reasons to over- or understate the influence of interest groups. As put in a survey of research on interest groups: “The difficulty [of assessing interest group influence] is, in fact, compounded by groups’ claims of impact and decision makers’ equally vociferous claims of freedom from any outside influence” (Loomis and Cigler 1995: 25). Moreover, well-known biases in the recollection of past events (failings of human memory, the imposition of current knowledge on recollections of the past, the imposition of a narrative structure on unconnected events, and so on; see for example Schacter 2001) can lead to unconscious misrepresentations. While in theory all evidence gained from interviews (or any other source) should be checked against other evidence, in practice this tends to be difficult. The problem is further compounded if researchers interview those respondents that are most readily available; in the case of the EU, these are most often officials in the European Commission located in Brussels. The resulting selection bias is not only problematic for the generalisation of findings, but also for the validity of the results obtained for the case at hand.

Third, for studies relying on process-tracing it is difficult to assess the degree of influence, as a yardstick is lacking. It sometimes appears that interest groups have to be completely dominant in order that influence is ascribed to them in these case studies. A case study of the attempts of the Oil Companies International Maritime Forum to influence EU decisions on the maritime

transport of oil illustrates this point (Michalowitz 2007). The forum was successful in avoiding the establishment of a European fund for compensation in the case of oil pollution damage, an issue that it had vehemently opposed. Moreover, the forum managed to push decisions to the international level, again in line with its preferences. Nevertheless, the author of the case study concludes that the group was not particularly influential, as the influence that was exerted “only touched upon technical questions” (Michalowitz 2007: 145). It could be argued, however, that as long as the Forum achieved its aims – that is, managed to bring outcomes in line with its preferences – it should be considered highly influential. This example just illustrates that it is often difficult to ensure the intersubjective verifiability of a qualitative judgment of influence.

Fourth, process-tracing leads to erroneous findings if too much weight is given to the level of interest group activity in making inferences about influence. Even when only little activity is observable, interest groups may have a substantial impact on outcomes. For example, it may be that groups lobby little on a specific issue simply because decision-makers adopted a decision that is in line with the groups’ preferences. They may have done so to pre-empt a situation in which they have to confront powerful interest groups. An example is the Common Agricultural Policy, where the European Commission is likely to anticipate the reaction of farm lobbies to any proposal for reforms. Neither is it correct to argue that a strong lobby effort should necessarily be reflected in policy outcomes if interest groups are influential at all. Groups may engage in lobbying for objectives not directly related to influence, for example to attract new or satisfy existing members (see Dür and De Bièvre 2007; Lowery 2007).

Finally, because of the data requirements involved in process-tracing, this method can only be used in small-N studies. This pushes the issue of

generalisability to the foreground. While sometimes generalisations can be made based on small-N studies, especially if they involve least-likely or most-likely cases, in many instances this is not the case. Not even the meta-analysis of many studies based on process-tracing will lead to convincing generalisations since the population of such studies is likely to be biased in favour of particularly conflictive decisions, which receive more public attention. Moreover, in many studies, no reason for the selection of a specific case is given, making it difficult to judge whether these cases are intended to be representative of a larger population.

The “attributed influence” method

“Attributed influence” (March 1955) is measured by way of surveys. In a survey, a group can be asked to provide a self-assessment of its influence or a peer-assessment of the influence of other groups. In addition, a survey can be directed at (hopefully well-informed) observers who report groups’ reputation for influence. Only few such surveys have been carried out to assess attributed influence in the EU (for exceptions, see Edgell and Thomson 1999; Pappi and Henning 1999; Dür and De Bièvre 2007).

A major advantage of this method is its relative simplicity. Although there are difficulties to designing a questionnaire, and establishing the population from which a sample of respondents is taken, these difficulties are minor when compared to the difficulties that researchers face that use one of the other two methods discussed in this note. Moreover, the method of measuring attributed influence is likely to capture all channels of influence. Respondents who are asked to assess the influence of British interest groups on the Common Agricultural Policy (Edgell and Thomson 1999), for example, are likely to give an estimate that takes into account all four channels of influence distinguished above.

Alas, this method for measuring interest group influence also comes with substantial drawbacks, which slightly vary depending on the type of actors asked. Self-estimations of influence can be biased both, towards an exaggeration of influence and a playing down of influence. The former may result from associations stressing the relevance of their work to their members. The latter may be a strategy to avoid the creation of counter-lobbies, which may spring up to stem the influence of a specific actor. In peer-assessments, respondents may find it difficult to answer a question on the influence of other actors owing to a lack of information and analytic capacity. In addition, the answers that researchers receive may again be strategic: minimising the role of other actors to reduce their importance or inflating it to create a public backlash. An interesting result of these tendencies can be that self and peer-assessments differ substantially. Non-governmental organisations, for example, frequently complain about their relative lack of influence over European trade policy, which they contrast with the major influence they attribute to business (Dür and De Bièvre 2007). Business lobbyists, by contrast, grumble about their lack of influence, as compared to the power of nongovernmental organizations.

The method of asking expert observers to gauge the influence of different groups also has short-comings. When asked to give an assessment of a group's influence across many issues, the assessment may unconsciously be shaped by specific, prominent cases. At other times, experts may simply recap the findings reported in academic studies using one of the other methods discussed here (as their perceptions are likely to be influenced by these studies), and in doing so may simply duplicate the problems inherent with other methods. Expert judgments may also lead to the reification of widely accepted beliefs (e.g., "big companies are powerful"). As a result, few "surprising" results will surface from studies relying on expert assessments.

There are also some problems that are relevant for all variants of the attributed influence approach to measuring interest group influence. Most importantly, this measure assesses perceptions of influence, rather than actual influence (Polsby 1960). In addition, in general surveys do not uncover information on what kind of influence interest groups had (what did they change in the real world?). Furthermore, if the question posed is about generic influence, the respondent is asked to provide an average across many issues, thereby neglecting potential differences from one issue to another. Sometimes, however, such variation may be of particular interest. Finally, problems that affect all surveys are pertinent: deficient respondent recollection, interviewer bias, and respondents' tendency to avoid extreme values when asked to provide a numerical ranking on a pre-given scale are just some of the more prominent potential pitfalls.

Assessing the degree of preference attainment

The third method for measuring interest group influence is to assess groups' degree of preference attainment. In this method, the outcomes of political processes are compared to the ideal points of actors. At its most basic, the idea is that the distance between an outcome and the ideal point of an actor reflects the influence of this actor. In more complex approaches, researchers try to control for other forces moving outcomes closer or further away from an actor's ideal point.

Several studies have applied this method to the study of interest group influence in the EU (Schneider and Baltz 2004; Mahoney 2007; Dür 2008). Schneider and Baltz (2004) analysed a sample of 15 legislative proposals presented by the European Commission. For these proposals in four countries they determined the initial position of the lead ministry, the final national position, and the ideal points of various interest groups. They then calculated

the degree of influence as the difference between two absolute differences: between a group's ideal position and the initial position of the lead ministry in the country, and between a group's ideal position and the final national position. Mahoney (2007) drew a random sample of advocates lobbying the EU institutions. She asked these advocates which issue they had worked on most recently and used the resulting list of 26 issues as her sample of cases. To assess influence, she coded whether or not an outcome reflected the preferences of the groups active on this issue. This allowed her to draw conclusions on which type of actor was more or less likely to be influential. Dür (2008) distinguished 19 aspects of the EU's position in the Doha Development Agenda (2001 onwards), on which interest groups could have had an impact. He then took a coincidence between interest group demands and the EU's position across a large number of these aspects as indicating interest group influence.

Measuring interest group influence by assessing the degree of preference attainment has several advantages. Most importantly, this method can pick up influence even if nothing visible happens, for example because all lobbying is secret or because structural power is at work. Through whatever channel it works (with the exception of selection in some approaches, see below), influence by definition should be visible in the outcomes that can be studied. As a result, this measure is more likely to find influence at work than process-tracing. Moreover, the degree of preference attainment can be assessed for a relatively large number of cases. The resulting large-N studies, if the cases were selected following the appropriate rules, allow for generalisations of the findings. Finally, the degree of preference attainment can be measured quantitatively (Schneider and Baltz 2004), which allows for more precise assessments of the degree of influence. This contrasts with process-tracing,

where researchers are largely limited to stating that a group either did or did not have influence.

Just as the measures of interest group influence discussed above, this one also comes with a few drawbacks. The first problem concerns the determination of preferences (Tsebelis 2005). In some policy fields, establishing the preferences of actors is quite straightforward. In monetary policy, for example, it is relatively uncontroversial to assume that internationally-oriented industries have an interest in exchange rate stabilization, while import-competitors have an interest in devaluations (Frieden 2002). In trade policy, similarly, export-oriented businesses and agricultural producers can be assumed to favour trade liberalization, while import-competitors have a preference for protectionist policies (Dür 2008). In studies dealing with other policy fields, or with many issues across many policy fields, however, the preferences of actors have to be established empirically for each issue that is to be decided (Schneider and Baltz 2004; Mahoney 2007). This is mostly done by way of interviews, with the problem that such interviews are likely to uncover the – possibly strategic – positions of actors rather than the underlying preferences. Even in interviews that take place after the events under investigation have finished, the participating actors are likely to strategically or unconsciously misrepresent their preferences. Neither are experts necessarily a reliable source of preferences (see the discussion in Dorussen et al. 2005). As this measure of interest group influence heavily relies on information on the preferences of actors, this is a critical problem.

A second problem with this measure of influence is that it can be difficult to control for alternative factors explaining a coincidence between preferences and outcomes. Some authors maintain that random selection or a large number of cases should lead to the cancelling out of alternative explanations

(Mahoney 2007: 38; Schneider and Baltz 2004: 131). Others try to examine their hypotheses against alternative explanations, either using qualitative (Dür 2008) or quantitative evidence (Frieden 2002). Nevertheless, excluding all possible rival explanations is difficult whether random selection is used or alternative explanations are tackled head on.

A further problem associated with this measure is the black-boxing of the process through which influence is exercised. While it is an advantage that this method can take into account different channels of influence, it is at the same time problematic that it does not make it clear through which channels influence is exerted. Moreover, some studies using this measure cannot take into account influence that is exerted through the selection channel. If decision-makers share the preferences of societal actors, because voters selected them based on these preferences, measuring influence as the change in decision-makers' positions resulting from lobbying underestimates the extent of influence. Decision-makers may also adopt a strategic position, which already takes into account interest group demands. Selection effects and strategic behaviour may explain why Schneider and Baltz (2004: 135) find that on many of the issues they studied there was little controversy, with no societal actors contesting the position of the lead ministry.

At least two problems also arise at the time of quantifying the degree of influence. For one, there is a problem with multi-dimensional topics, as issues have to be very specific to allow researchers to code whether or not a group was successful. It is plausible to imagine a situation in which a group manages to influence one specific aspect of a legislation that is important to it, but not the rest of the legislation. This calls for a disaggregation of political decisions to very specific issues; however, the greater the disaggregation, the more difficult it is to get data on the preferences of actors. Related to this issue is

the difficulty of controlling for the salience that an issue has for an interest group when using this measure of influence. If a group is successful on 20 percent of the issues and unsuccessful on 80 percent, a simple quantitative analysis would suggest that the group is little influential. It may be, however, that the group is successful on the issues that are highly salient to it (for example, because it invests more resources on those issues), and unsuccessful on those that are not salient to it. In that case, it should be considered quite influential. In the project forming the basis for the study by Schneider and Baltz (2004), an attempt was made to tackle this difficulty by taking salience into account. Nevertheless, in this attempt, salience was estimated by a third actor, and it is questionable whether such a third actor can ever have enough information to make such a judgment.

Where from here?

In short, measuring interest group influence is a tricky business. What recommendations can be given to researchers who want to analyse interest group influence in the EU? I stress the need for a better design of research projects, methodological triangulation, and “method-shopping”.

Research design

For one, already an awareness of the problems inherent in measuring interest group influence outlined above should help in overcoming them. If researchers were more conscious of the biases that possibly result from their approaches to the measurement of influence, they could take them into account when designing their projects. Other problems may persist; but an explicit discussion of these problems arising with the research design of a study, and of the level of uncertainty that the problems introduce in the

findings, would facilitate meta-analyses of many studies with more conclusive results than is currently the case.

Methodological triangulation

Another way forward derives from the previous discussion of strengths and drawbacks of the three methods of measuring interest group influence. If, as has been argued above, process-tracing is likely to underestimate interest group influence and the measurement of preference attainment is likely to overestimate it, combining the two may correct these biases. Methodological triangulation – the combination of different methods in one study – hence may sometimes resolve problems which cannot be tackled in studies that rely only on one method. In fact, several studies have successfully combined different methods to study interest group influence. Arts and Verschuren (1999) suggest a specific combination between the attributed influence method and process-tracing, which they call the “EAR instrument”. This instrument combines the self-perception of the actors themselves (the E, for ego-perception), perceptions from other key players (the A, for alter-perception), and process-tracing (the R, for researcher’s analysis). Dür and De Bièvre (2007) combine a survey of interest groups with process-tracing to assess the influence that non-governmental organisations have on European trade policy.

Nevertheless, methodological triangulation should not be seen as a panacea, either. Some of the problems inherent in individual methods are compounded rather than solved when several methods are integrated in a research project. For example, gathering the necessary evidence for process-tracing will be even more difficult if a researcher also has to invest time in applying other methods. This is likely to lead to a further restriction in the number of cases analysed, which undermines the possibility for

generalisations. Moreover, methodological triangulation brings up the problem of what a researcher should do if different measurements lead to different results. How should competing results be reconciled? Despite these drawbacks, in many occasions methodological triangulation is likely to provide more accurate measures of interest group influence than we currently have.

Method-shopping

Finally, not all methods available to researchers to gauge interest group influence have been applied to the context of the EU. “Method-shopping” could improve the sophistication of the literature on EU interest group influence. One such method available is the method of “paired comparisons” (Verschuren and Arts 2004), which is a variant of the preference attainment approach discussed above. It suggests measuring for each pair of actors which actor’s preference was closer to the final outcome. Expressed as an equation,

$$PR_i = \bullet P_{i0} - FD \bullet \sim \bullet P_{j0} - FD \bullet \quad (1)$$

where P_{i0} and P_{j0} are the positions of actors A_i and A_j respectively, and FD is the location of the final decision. A_i receives a score of 1 if $\bullet P_{i0} - FD \bullet > \bullet P_{j0} - FD \bullet$, A_i receives a score of 0 if $\bullet P_{i0} - FD \bullet < \bullet P_{j0} - FD \bullet$, and A_i receives a score of $\frac{1}{2}$ if $\bullet P_{i0} - FD \bullet = \bullet P_{j0} - FD \bullet$. In a second step, influence is ascribed to an actor if preference realization is due to influence rather than alternative causes. The scores are then added up for each actor across all pairs, resulting in a set of values that capture the influence of each actor on the outcome.

The method comes with several advantages: even in single case studies, it allows for influence to be assessed at interval level; the way influence is

assessed is made transparent; individual biases may be cancelled out; and it ensures that counteractive lobbying will be taken into account in a systematic manner. While the method is a handy addition to the toolbox available to researchers of interest group influence in the EU, evidently it also comes with some drawbacks. In particular, the data requirements are so high that mostly this method will be applied to single cases only, again leading to the difficulty of generalising beyond the case studied. Even in single cases, the method may not be applicable if many actors are involved since the number of pairs that have to be analysed rises steeply with the number of actors (the number of pairs is $\frac{1}{2}n(n-1)$, where n denotes the number of actors).

Moreover, although the process of measuring influence is made transparent, paired comparisons still rely on a series of qualitative judgments about the impact of external factors and the possibility for band-wagoning on the influence of other actors. Finally, the method disadvantages actors with extreme preferences: what actually would have to be analysed is to what extent an actor was able to move a counter-factual outcome towards his or her own preference (rather than the distance between position and final outcome). This latter drawback may explain why in the example given by Verschuren and Arts (2004), namely the negotiations concerning the Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992), the United States ended up being assigned substantially less influence than the EU and Japan, and only slightly more than the oil-exporting countries.

Conclusion

Is the attempt at measuring interest group influence in the EU necessarily doomed to failure? Is researching interest group influence really like “searching for a black cat in the coal bin at midnight” (as put by a lobbyist,

quoted in Loomis 1983: 184)? Some scholars seem to think that this is the case, and either simply leave aside this issue (Bouwen 2004: 337) or even explicitly advocate that researchers should study other topics (Woll 2007). In my view, neither approach is satisfying; the issue of interest group influence is too important to be neglected. Evidently, there are major difficulties in measuring influence, but some advances have been made over the last decades. Further progress can be made by tackling existing problems head-on, being adamant and not giving up too early.

In particular, what is needed for the case of the EU is a project similar to the one on lobbying and policy advocacy that produced a wealth of empirical information on interest group lobbying in the US (Baumgartner et al. 2001). In the framework of that project, researchers identified the actors lobbying at the federal level on 98 randomly-selected issues, their positions on these issues, their resources, and the coalitions they enter into. If applied to the EU, such a project would enable us to test issue-level and contextual variables, which have to be held constant in studies that are restricted to specific issues or policy fields. A large-N study of randomly selected issues may, for example, show that interest group tactics are driven by the issue context and hence have no independent effect on the degree of influence wielded by groups. The approach of starting with a sample of randomly selected issues would also help us overcome the problem that many existing studies only consider a specific type of actor, such as trade associations or firms. A larger-scale project that gathers data on interest group lobbying across many issues would hence not only provide novel insights, but it would also make future small-N studies more effective by giving researchers some idea of how the cases they pick fit into the larger universe of interest group activity in the EU.

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